Contest administration

Let's start with some administrative discussions then jump into the feedback some of the teams provided about the categories they judged.

Why didn't I win – from a general standpoint: I have heard several folks say they submitted their best work and were disappointed because they didn't place, let alone win. Here is what I can tell you about my experiences with the contest and coming to a consensus. As a DINFOS instructor, my team would do exercises and compare notes regularly to ensure we had consistency in our grading. While we often each had our own focal points, we were nearly always within one standard deviation of each other on our grading. That's hard to do with a group of folks who, in many cases, are meeting for the first time and are trying to come to decisions within a day's worth of effort. In most cases, I would tell you I can assemble three different teams and they will likely come to three different results. So don't fret – completely.

Is there a reason the Army seemed to have more success than the Air submissions at the service level competition? Maybe a little bit of the above, but I would think it's more mathematical – the Air contest allows us to submit only the first place winners, while the Army allows us to submit top three. Statistically that should provide more opportunities for success.

Acronyms: PA is always told to avoid acronyms whenever possible but there is one I like. RTI. It's simple – **R**ead **T**he **I**nstructions. While not perfect (Yes – I am fixing some of the inconsistencies) they were fairly straightforward and relatively simple.

- **Naming conventions:** The naming conventions were spelled out in the SOP but about 35 percent of the submissions were incorrect. Next year will be very simple – Army will follow Army naming convention and Air will follow Air naming convention.

- **To include or not to include:** Especially in the COMREL submissions, more **ISN'T** better. The SOPs specifically outline what the contest administrators are looking for. The judges don't have time to read through everything units/people try to include. Keep it simple and ONLY include what is asked for. Flip that coin and there were numerous packages missing significant pieces – missing an issue in the newspaper categories when two were required, missing an official photo when they were required, missing communication plans outlining what submissions were used to support, etc…

- **Format:** The KLW SOP said all files for a category entry should be bundled in one PDF. I can count the number of submissions that did that one a single hand.

- **Timeline:** Remember our deadline and the FTP site crash of that day?   It's likely that trying to post nearly a terabyte of data at one time crashed the site. Fortunately we were able to regroup and extend the deadline, but next year we will be developing a schedule for states to post their files to prevent the data overload – it may be by region (similar to what we do with the regional state calls) or by category but we will let you know well ahead of deadline and will clearly spell out the schedule.

- **More on timeline:** We had some units who were all over this and had their files posted within a couple weeks of us posting the SOP right after Thanksgiving. Something to keep in mind, and we will be sending out reminders much earlier next year, is that the timeline doesn't usually deviate by more than a day or two every year. So you can start to plan now – have your writers start setting aside articles/photos/newscasts or whatever as they complete them. We all have those stories we would rather forget about, but we also have those ones we are exceptionally proud of. Make your end-of-year jobs much easier by setting those special ones aside each training assembly.

- **Entry forms:** Some folks did well, others - not so much. Some packages had only name and unit blocks completed – no signature from anyone, no address – nothing. With hundreds of entries, there is no time to send mistakes back to correct.

What was looked for?

Okay - enough blabbering about administrative issues. The Air SOP outlined what criteria they were looking for, but the Army did not so I applied the criteria to the scoring sheets in both contests. Below are the outlines for the scoring.

Broadcast:

Each criteria point will be rated on a scale of 1-5, 1 being the worst and 5 being the best.

Value to the audience:

Script/message effectiveness:

Creativity:

Technical Quality:

Voice/Diction/Camera Presence:

Photo

Each criteria point will be rated on a scale of 1-5, 1 being the worst and 5 being the best.

Composition:

Impact:

Storytelling:

Caption/cutline:

For web and print entries, the criteria below were used. The numbers were from the Air competition and applied to the corresponding KLW categories.

Judges will adhere to the following criteria to select the winning entries of Web Categories 01 and 02:

1. Content:

2. Professional excellence:

3. Support of internal information objectives:

4. Design:

5. Overall value to the reader:

Judges will adhere to the following criteria to select winning entries of Print Categories 03-08, 11, 12, 13, 42, 43 and 44:

1. Lead:

2. Transition - Page 31 of 39:

3. Body:

4. Conclusion:

5. Mechanics (grammar, etc.) :

6. Overall value to the reader:

Note: Print judges should evaluate photos in Category 8 using photography criteria below, and how well the photos and print story work together to tell the story.

Judges will adhere to the following criteria to select the winning entries of New Media Categories 9 and 10:

1. Content:

2. Professional excellence:

3. Support of command initiatives and communication objectives:

4. Overall value to the reader:

Now onto the comments some of the teams provided. Not all of the teams provided comments – I tried to pull trending comments from individual scoring sheets where possible below. Specific comments I highlighted below are ones that appeared three or more times in feedback.

Trends across both contests:

Journalism entries:

- **Entry didn't match category:** Saw this comment numerous times. I looked closely at the human interest cat for KLW as I was doing the package QA and of the 60-some entries, more than 40 of them had straight news leads. Features are where you should be having f un and including lots of details – age, hometown, what makes people tick! Why do you think People magazine is one of the highest distributed periodicals? People want to know about people.
- **See notes below for quotes but this is also important:** according to should be 'reserved for policy, docs, regs, disputable sources. Just say 'said.'
- **Copy editing:** many units have a local style, but that doesn't take into account grammar, punctuation, etc.
- **Local angle:** A couple times comments said "the local angle was buried." The local tie is what makes strategic policy articles relevant to your audiences.
- **Topics:** General comments from most of the judges were the topics were good. They did however say there were missed opportunities to get more depth with the topics.

Photo feedback: I didn't get consolidated general feedback on photos for either the Air or Army but across both competitions the most general comments I saw related to composition, focus and cutlines (either too long or too short, and numerous comments about too much jargon)

Some individual comments:
- Clean, well balanced image.
- Story telling is inherent in the image
- Well framed but expected image
- Nice use of light and body language in the image

Broadcast feedback: Same as with photo, some trending comments below.
- Music levels a bit too overpowering
- Nice opening sequence
- Nice use of action reaction
- Took a very ordinary event and pulled (hooked) me in and made me want to watch
- Be careful of how you use dissolves, the standard for using them is to transition time and or place, if you are sequencing the same location the dissolve should only be used as a visual enhancer
- Non narrative news stories have to be super strong in the sound-bite area in order to tell the story. I would have liked more explanation of their mission goals and noted events.
- Work on your sequencing, CU transitions, action-reaction sequencing and nat sound transistions

Air competition:

Cat 1 Judges Comments:
Jet Gazette is the standard by which others should be measured; beautiful looking pub.

From my view, the Jet Gazette was a clear first place winner. The Jayhawk Flyer was a solid second; while the Wyoming paper had some strengths, but could have tied with several others for third.

Cat 5 Judges Comments:
All of these entries showed evidence of solid craftsmanship, none of them really sparkled. That said, commentary is tough to produce, especially in an environment where writers instinctively pull their rhetorical punches so as to ruffle as few feathers possible.

Cat 6 Judges comments:
I'm not much of a sports fan, so it's difficult for me to get excited about this category. I selected MSgt Speck as the winner based on his really clean writing. I think he did the best job of writing a quality news story about a sports-related topic. The others stories started to get gummed up with the insipid quotes from participants that sound like they were written, edited and command approved before the words passed the lips of those quoted. Overall, the writing is very journeyman like, evidence of good DINFOS training and/or comparable civilian training and experience. A few entries contained a small sprinkling of copy editing errors, so it's tough to tell if the authors are deficient, or are editors not catching the clinkers. Or, are talented editors saving the weaker writers' butts? We'll never know.

Cat 7 Judges comments:
Overall, nearly all of the entries were good. Nothing was so stale or error-filled to warrant special mention for poor quality or effort. I'd say that "steady state" remains my assessment of entries to the National Guard Media Contest, and that's waaaaaaaayyyyyyyy better then I remember from my era.

Complaints (I always have something to gripe about)? Military writers need to break the habit of including valueless quotes in their articles. I know that DINFOS teaches the use of quotes. Interview subjects generally like to see themselves quoted in publications, and the addition of quotes does provide the writer with another tool to move a story along and get the darn thing finished. That said, most of the quoted words and phrases that get published are a real snooze. Does any soldier or airman ever verbally express genuine emotion? Maybe not…

  ADMINISTRATOR'S NOTE: DINFOS teaches students to use quotes, but as the judge explained, direct quotes should be ones with impact. The schoolhouse focuses on attribution! In other words, you need to have material that someone might not consider general knowledge attributed to someone. Does that mean it needs to be a direct quote – NO! Paraphrase, indirect quote, etc, but there are several ways to attribute information without making it a direct quote. To take a comment from one of the judges who is currently a DINFOS instructor - reserve quotes for something profound or stimulating ("we moved 475 pallets of…" This should be paraphrased.)

KLW submissions:

General Observations: In the news category there was a wide variety of stories to judge with topics ranging from combat in Afghanistan to helping victims in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. The judging panel felt the best stories got to the point quickly with plain language and simple words. The best stories all had these traits we liked:

Category I:

Facts were presented in a logical order.

Quotes were strong and not something that resembled remarks on an efficiency report.

Scenes/incidents were connected seamlessly by transitions.

The writing did not attempt to call attention to itself (the writer's skill), but, rather to the story contents.

The best writing did not rely on adjectives. Instead, writers chose strong verbs and adverbs and let readers supply the adjectives themselves.

The best writing used simple, easily understood, common words.

The best stories used multiple sources – the majority of them enlisted soldiers and officers on the ground and in the front lines. Weaker stories relied solely on the "big picture" comments from senior officers and NCOs.

The best stories contained subtle command messages designed to raise morale by showing NG soldiers important ways they make a difference in their communities and in the world.

The best stories displayed consistent style and minimized grammar/sentence structure errors.

Category J:

As with the News category, a wide variety of news features entered the competition. Included were stories on planting food crops in Afghanistan to combat easy profits from drug crops; on NG soldiers helping victims right after Hurricane Sandy; and on the Indiana National Guard boosting recruiting efforts by purchasing camouflage football jerseys for high school teams.

The best stories had simple ledes that conveyed the news element early, then conveyed the other information in a features format.

The best stories emotionally engaged readers rather than swamped them with difficult-to-comprehend facts and figures.

The best stories helped the reader be in the center of the action, rather than watching the action from the nosebleed seats.

The best stories had strong conclusions – whether told by the characters in the story or crafted by the writer.

The best stories planted the "Yeah-THAT'S why-I-signed-up" thought firmly in the reader's brain.

The best stories emphasized a twofold National Guard mission – acting as a fighting force defending our nation and being an active force when the community needs it.

Areas Needing Improvement

Too many of the articles seemed to ignore the primary target audience – the young, first- and second-term enlisted soldiers and officers. Far too many of the articles quoted only the higher-ranking commanders or state governors rather than the soldiers actually doing the work or out on patrol. Commander comments are fine for the overall big picture, but quotes from people on the front lines add authenticity and credence.

Some stories buried the lede. One story ran readers through a set-up stating that a number of active-duty and some NG teams took part in a ranger competition. Seven grafs later, readers learned that one NG team finished second overall. That's far too long to make readers wait.

CAT I Winner - Lots of history and emotion wrapped up in this story. More of a news feature than a straight news story. Good storytelling throughout. Conveys a strong message that American service members retain a special place in history and in the present.

CAT J Winner – Excellent example of a timely news feature. The lede is a summary/descriptive that sets the scene nicely. The two NG soldiers introduced in the following graf play key roles in the story and are quoted nicely. There's a quote by the task force commander, a brigadier general, but it's not overblown or out of proportion. I loved that the writer beat the bushes for sources, including victims, rescuers, fire captains and Guard soldiers. Quotes were meaningful and portrayed character and emotion.